

ABROAD

BAGHDAD

In Relief

The stalemate of Western policy in the Middle East following the withdrawal of peacekeeping troops from Beirut has thrown into relief Soviet positions in the region, according to diplomatic observers here. While Soviet support for Syrian and Libyan initiatives is taken for granted, observers say that the resumption of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Cairo, following a long series of conciliatory moves, must be counted a clear success for Soviet diplomacy. Moscow is also now considered to be in a position of considerable strength in the Persian Gulf. Not only has it reassumed its earlier position as principal military supplier to Iraq—with whom, for example, it recently signed a nuclear assistance treaty—but it has also maneuvered with some success within the Tudeh, the Iranian Communist party, to reduce its hitherto unconditional support for Islamic fundamentalism.

FARNBOROUGH

Buying Soviet

The Soviet Union will attempt to make a commercial breakthrough in sales of civilian aircraft and equipment to Western airlines at the British air show at Farnborough in September. A fifty-man-strong Soviet delegation will hustle three different aircraft and entertain Western buyers at a lavish hospitality house during the show in an unaccustomed exhibition of salesmanship. The planes are the Il-86, a wide-bodied, 350-passenger commercial "airbus"; the An-72, a twin-engined cargo carrier designed for short runways; and the huge Mi-26 helicopter, which has eight rotor blades and a normal twenty-ton payload, five tons more than its biggest American rival. Heretofore, Soviet aviation products have flopped in the West, mostly because the Soviets have consistently refused to let Western buyers into their factories to check on production methods and quality-control procedures. The helicopter will probably arouse the most interest, even though it has been used so far only in military service. Two large trucks can fit into its main cargo space, and it recently flew to a level of 13,000 feet carrying a load of 25 tons, an unprecedented feat.

CANBERRA

Booming Again

Australia has rejoined the ranks of the boom countries by racking up an annual growth rate of 7.9 per cent, according to figures for the first quarter of this year, and predictions of a 10 per cent rise in the Australian GNP are being heard in the land. A sharp improvement in corporate profits has been largely responsible for the dramatic turnaround, and stocks have zoomed up after a decline of a year and a half. Wage increases have slowed, and although consumer spending has risen very mildly, business profits have shot up by more than 17 per cent. Unemployment remains below 10 per cent, and inflation below 6 per cent. Labour Prime Minister Bob Hawke is being urged to call a new election to capitalize on these successes, although there are a number of warning signs on the horizon, including what are considered over-ambitious

projects for state spending as well as protectionism among labor unions. Dispassionate observers say that much of the government's economic success is due to the ending of the worst drought in Australian history since Labour took power 15 months ago.

BERGEN

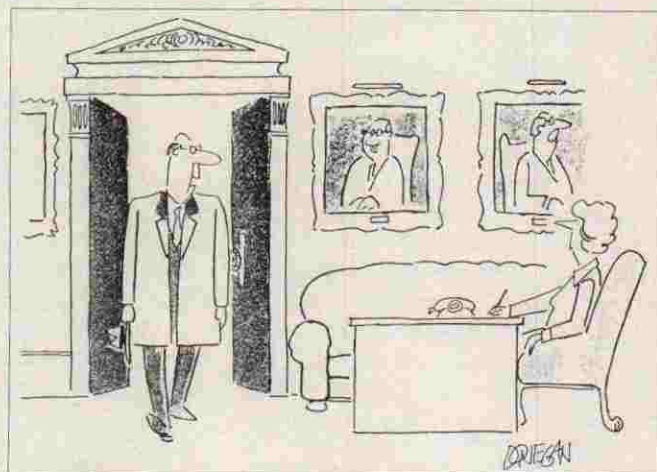
Mussel-Bound

One of the minor but abiding difficulties facing those who run the North Sea oil and gas rigs are the huge encrustations of mussels that regularly build up on the surface of the rigs' legs. The weight of the shellfish causes structural problems, and it takes divers hours of laborious chipping away before the rigs are clear of them. Now oil engineers and marine biologists have come up with a solution—coating the steel legs with a rubber silicone that slowly releases oil to the surface of the steel and makes it impossible for the mussels and other marine organisms to fasten themselves there. The technique is believed to have wide application throughout the world, especially in warm waters, where marine animals of this sort are more numerous and therefore more of a problem.

NETHER STOWEY

Good-bye

The village postmistress has long been a familiar character in chronicles of English country life, especially detective fiction, but for her kind in many a picturesque hamlet across the land, the bell is tolling. The institution, at least in its historical role, seems doomed. British postal authorities have decided, on the basis of a cost-effectiveness study, that approximately one thousand of these sub-post offices, as they are called, must close. In many a village, a lively neighborhood presence will have gone, along with the men and women who run them, dispensing information, advice, and comfort year in and year out. For the post office in Britain does far more than distribute mail and sell stamps and money orders. It also pays out old-age pensions and unemployment compensation, issues dog licenses, and runs its own savings bank. The actual decree stipulates that there should not be less than a mile between two post offices anywhere in the country. This fact in itself gives a vivid idea of how intimate a part of the community such post offices could be, nearly always one-man operations. In some cases, the old people of a village may have no one else to talk to all week long.



"I'm going to lunch, Miss Whitney. Put the company on autopilot."

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